Burning through Organizational Boundaries?
## *Examining Collaborative Wildland Fire Planning in the United States and New South Wales, Australia*

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Wildland fire burns through ecological, geo-political, and organizational boundaries. Policy-makers in Australia and the US legislate cross-organizational wildfire planning to coordinate fire management, facilitate communication and data exchange, and build common knowledge. Practitioners and theorists recognize these intangible outcomes as some of the greatest benefits of collaboration. We examine the presence of social outcomes in two such policy frameworks: (1) Community Wildfire Protection Planning (CWPP) under the US Healthy Forests Restoration Act, and (2) Bushfire Management Committees (BFMC) under the NSW Rural Fires Act.

Research Questions:

(1) Does policy-mandated planning foster **common understanding** among wildland fire stakeholders from different agencies?

(2) How does **cross-organizational communication** change during and after policy-mandated planning processes?

(3) To what extent do agency representatives **communicate with their home agencies** about the planning process?
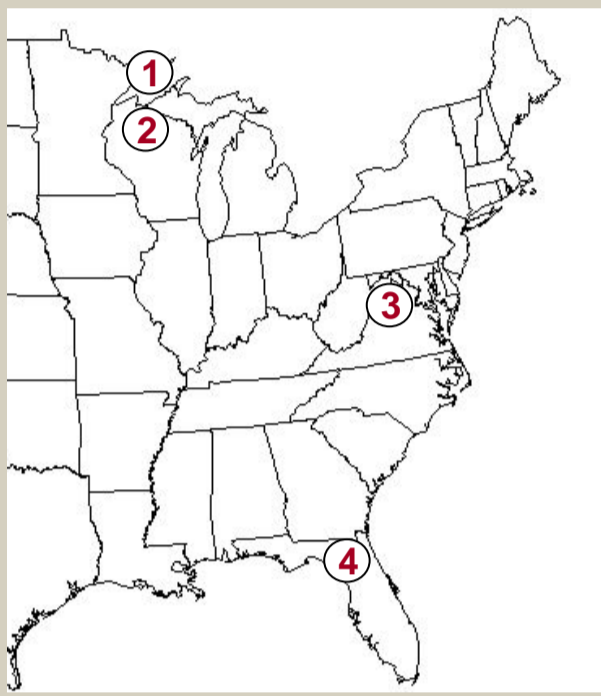
US: CWPP Case Studies
- 4 planning groups:
  - (1) Lake County, MN
  - (2) Barnes and Drummond, WI
  - (3) High Knob, VA
  - (4) Taylor, FL
- 57 in-depth, qualitative interviews
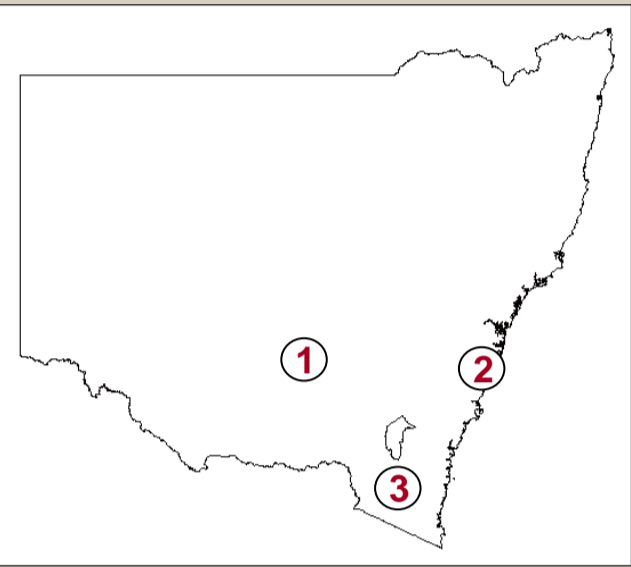
NSW: BFMC Case Studies
- 3 BFMC groups:
  - (1) Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area
  - (2) Illawarra
  - (3) Snowy-Monaro
- 32 quantitative surveys
- Preliminary findings, 51 interviews

US and NSW Policy Distinctions
- NSW prescribes **membership**, US is flexible
- Planning **administered** by NSW RFS; no formal US administrative body
- NSW groups **accountable** to state-level council, US groups largely autonomous
- NSW **planning areas** pre-defined, US planning areas group-defined

1) Can policy work to create shared understanding?

In cases in both countries, planning provided a forum for dialogue resulting in enhanced common understanding of:
- all agencies' **roles, limitations**, and **capabilities**
- locally specific **causes** and **consequences** of wildland fire
- a landscape **vision for management** approaches
- future **opportunities to collaborate** cross-organizationally

"[The process] helped the partners come together and understand what everybody's role is as a whole. Looking at the big picture ... 'cause everybody was just working on their own before." (USA).

However, in some groups the mandated collaboration did not create common understanding among partners because:
- Common **understanding pre-existed** amongst agency partners and **no new stakeholders** were brought in for the planning process.
  "I think [the shared understanding] was probably already there because we've had so much experience in the past with it". (USA)
- **Intractable conflict** and disagreement about fire management
  "It was more of a negotiation process." (NSW)

2) How does planning policy influence cross-organizational communication?

Interviews showed that in many cases, relationship-building was held as the most significant outcome of the planning process. Participants reported:
- **Greater appreciation** of other organizations' management challenges
- **Improved communication** between organizations
- More **interagency collaboration** on projects such as cross-tenure prescribed burning

"[Relationships are] a huge thing. Getting people working together and talking together…I think when you know someone, you are more apt to work with them on other things.." (USA)

Figure 1. Communication among planning representatives increased during planning efforts (*$p<0.05$, ANOVA). Error bars =+/- 2 S.E.)

Quantitative investigation in NSW showed increased cross-organizational communication during planning. In most cases, communication returned to near pre-planning levels after planning was complete (Figure 1). However, interviewees noted:
- Enhanced **likelihood** of contacting others reps in the future
- Certain **stakeholders historically unconnected** with local fire networks (Rail, Energy) received great benefit from participation by expanding their fire communication network.

3) Do representatives communicate with home organizations about the process?

Interviews from the US indicated planning participants did **introduce what they had learned** within the planning process to others within the organization they represent:

"…I had a much better understanding of [wildfire] after the process. And I tried to bring that back to the fire departments…and give them the information." (USA)

Quantitative data from NSW supported this, showing that each participant communicates with an average of 2-3 individuals within their organization about the substance of the process.

This effectively creates larger cross-organizational **learning communities** related to landscape-level fire planning.
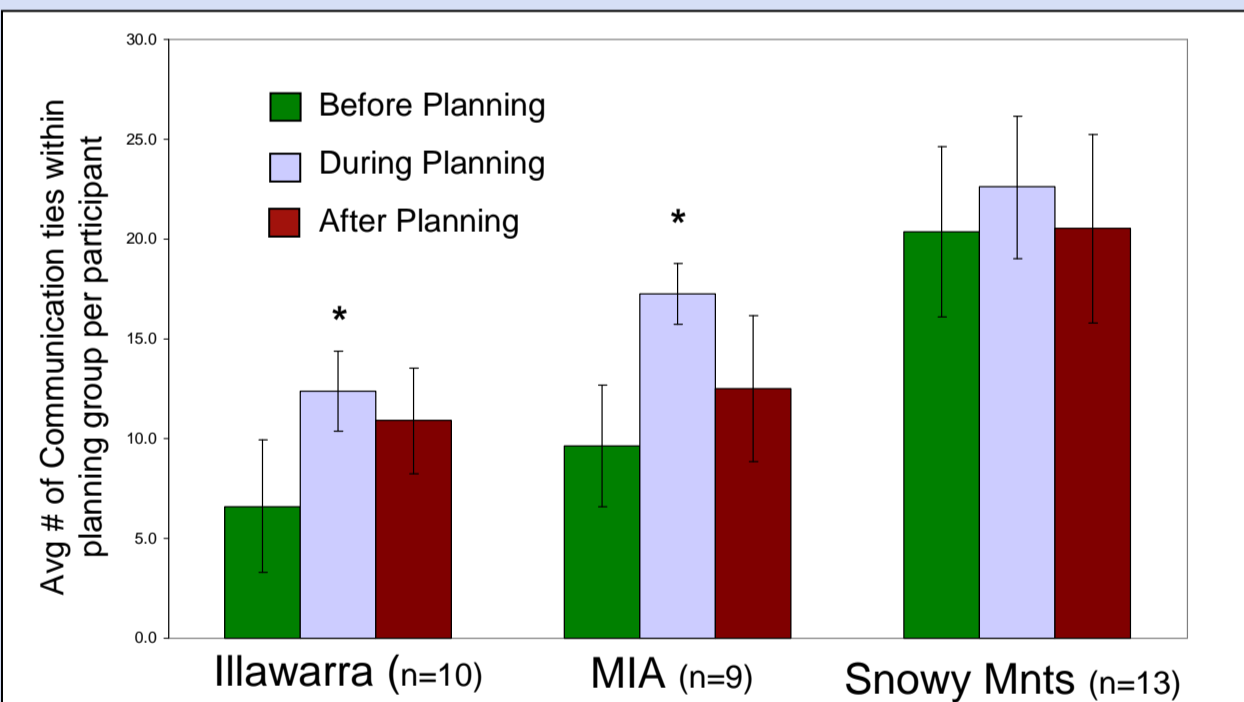
Summary Conclusions

Collaborative planning can "burn through" organizational boundaries by:
- Creating a **shared body of knowledge** and common understanding of fire management on the local landscape
- Improving **cross-organizational communication** and coordinated management. However, efforts should be made to **maintain relationships** after planning.
- Creating a larger **learning community** amongst planning participants and members in fire-associated organizations.

However, mandating collaboration through policy does not automatically afford these benefits.
- Effort should be made to **include key stakeholders** not historically involved in wildfire planning
- Groups with a recent **history of social conflict** around wildland fire management may struggle to improve relationships and build common understanding
- Additional challenges: turnover in agency representation and **leadership**, unpaid **volunteers** with limited time, **"committee paralysis"** in agency representatives.